

**Presentation of
Randi Youells, LSC Vice President for Programs**

**Oklahoma Statewide Diversity Symposium
Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
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Good morning and thank you for honoring me with an invitation to join you on this special occasion. I am pleased to be here for Oklahoma's first state justice community diversity symposium. Like you, I am also looking forward to our lunch speaker, Mr. Fred Gray, whose life is an inspiration to us all, and whose work to advance the central tenet of diversity — inclusion — is an appropriate theme for this event.

I also would like to take a moment to recognize several people here in this room today. Their belief that a commitment to diversity must guide the leaders of any equal justice movement has resulted in this daylong, statewide brainstorming session on 'managing' diversity. They know that, while we all acknowledge a 'belief' in diversity, we also need to pay close attention to how well our personal and professional efforts and our plans for the future reflect an appreciation for the complexity of our client communities. And they know that focusing on the diversity among our clients and their communities is not only the best way to serve clients, it is the only way to do so effectively.

Melissa DeLacerda, Oklahoma Bar Association President, embraced the purpose of this symposium and labored hard to ensure today's success. Melissa, leaders like you make wonderful things happen, and we thank you for your devotion to this cause. Melissa's predecessors, Joe Crosthwait, who ensured that the OBA Diversity Committee was created, and Bill Paul, who made diversity a touchstone of his leadership in Oklahoma and at the ABA, played pivotal roles in bringing us together. Jack Brown told me a year ago at the Equal Justice conference in Cleveland that legal services programs across the country needed to do a better job in reaching out to racially and culturally diverse clients and he challenged me to make inclusion one of the hallmarks of my tenure at LSC. And, of course, I must recognize the wonderful folks at Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma: Dallas Ferguson, John Williams, and their outstanding staff spent many hours designing the meeting. We are all appreciative of the effort that this event represents and for the commitment that underlies today's meeting.

Your purpose in gathering today is admirable, and I welcome the opportunity to help you set the course for addressing perhaps the most important issue confronting legal services programs at this time. John has asked me to share with you today my thoughts on how we define diversity. I am happy to try, but I would suggest that there are many people in this room who can probably define it better. And, I would suggest that as you go through the day, you give everyone here today the opportunity to *define diversity*.

I would be lying, however, if I did not say that diversity and inclusion are subjects to which I have given a lot of thought during my many years with civil legal services organizations. I was the Executive Director of Legal Services of Iowa in an era when the organization left behind the traditional 'mom and pop' law office whose clients were, for the most part, just what you'd expect in the Great Plains. Historically, the majority of our clients had forebears who had come to America from Northern Europe. They were adult men and women who had no jobs or worked intermittently; many but not all had children. When I left the program in 1992, however we were beginning to see the effects of changes in welfare law, immigration trends and new social mores in our state in terms of the clients who were walking through our doors. In the early 1990's, many of our clients included adolescent mothers and fathers, and grandparents raising grandchildren and great grandchildren. Our cities were now home to full-time working mothers and immigrants from Asia and Central America. We were serving many more people with AIDS and HIV — many of them gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual persons that had not previously sought assistance from a legal services office. These rapid changes in client demographics required us to begin to make changes in the way we provided legal services — we needed to speak to clients in languages other than English; we needed to offer services during non-traditional hours and in non-traditional ways in order to serve working poor people; we needed to make our offices places where gay and lesbian clients feel welcomed; we needed to demonstrate our concern for and our sustained commitment to clients who did not look like/speak like/worship like the clients of days gone by.

When my husband took a job in Pennsylvania in the early nineties, I became interim Executive Director at Camden Regional Legal Services in New Jersey. There were days when I thought I had taken a position at the United Nations, so varied were our staff members and clients, in their ethnicity and racial heritage, in their many languages, and in their cultural differences. While our staff "pot luck" lunches were culinary delights from all corners of the globe — I still think about those plantains that Carlos and Jose used to bring to the CRLS potluck — the internal issues arising from the many points of view and backgrounds could be difficult. What we faced was not just a situation where resolution lay in adding a bi-lingual advocate to the staff. We needed to become more sensitive and thoughtful about our differences, and learn to embrace

those with which we were not only unfamiliar but also sometimes a bit uncomfortable. In this, CRLS was typical of the issues confronting legal services programs and our society.

Three years ago, I became vice president at LSC. As you would expect, my days as an executive director have influenced much of what I do at LSC. Diversity issues have continued to be very important for me. Two years ago, and in partnership with NLADA, LSC held a series of conversations on diversity across the country. We sought the input of a diverse group of individuals from the larger community, and organized regional and national meetings and invited young leaders, executive directors, women, clients, and older and younger participants. We made sure that people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, and representatives from communities of color were included. Participants were asked to discuss the successes and challenges of providing critical legal services to a broad array of clients and their sometimes nontraditional legal issues, and of creating delivery systems that would do this efficiently and appropriately. From those conversations, we developed an **Action Agenda**, or road map, for LSC to use in developing resources for grantees in the area of diversity. A copy of that is in your materials today.

In 2002, I convened a group of executive directors and client board members to guide us in meeting one of the **Action Agenda's** most important goals — the creation of a training module for LSC program boards. I am very proud of the work of that Advisory Committee, and thrilled with the training tool we produced. A copy of that is also in your materials. It was tested with two very different LSC grantees — a statewide program in the northeast and a large program in the southwest — with equally positive results. We will hold a training later this month for facilitators who want to use the module to guide legal services programs, and LSC will assist grantees in obtaining the services of this trained group for their board and management team diversity training. We have created a new Advisory Committee for 2003, one that includes some of last year's members, to help LSC continue to work responsively on this issue. In all of these ways, we aspire to ensure that diversity is a central component of any program's strategic planning and day-to-day work.

LSC's emphasis over the past two years has reinforced for me what I learned as an executive director. As our comprehension of diversity grows, we are beginning to really understand that achieving our goals of tolerance and inclusion requires more than an articulated commitment to diversity. We have to remain attentive to the nuances of diversity as well as its broad purposes. It certainly isn't about counting noses, if it ever was. It is about how best to serve the "glittering mosaic" that constitutes our many client communities — clients who speak languages different than our own or who have customs that are unfamiliar to us; clients with pressing legal needs who are not coming

to legal services programs because they are afraid or uncomfortable or believe that we don't care about them and their problems.

In one of our national conversations on diversity, the group of participants developed a definition for diversity that is, in my opinion, a good beginning for your work today:

"Diversity is a state of being —where we want to be and where we are going. The ultimate goal of diversity is to expand the circle of inclusion. Diversity values a broad range of people so that no one is left out. It makes connections between various aspects of our individuality. It recognizes affinities along gender lines, along race and ethnicity patterns. When we value diversity, there is an acceptance of how our similarities and differences link us as well as how they make us unique."

Many important values are reflected in this statement. It recognizes that diversity is expansive and addresses all of our wonderful differences. It points out that having an executive director of color or attorneys who are bi-lingual is extraordinarily important, but not the end of the process. It challenges us to continually enlarge our community and make room for others. When you consider how to respond to an increasingly diverse world here in Oklahoma, ask yourself how you can reach out to the fullest extent of your program's ability to meet clients where they are, and to attract staff, leaders, and stakeholders who are dedicated to a broad and deep definition of diversity.

Recently, at a presentation I organized for the LSC Board of Directors, Wilhelm Joseph, whom some of you may know as the Executive Director of Legal Aid Bureau of Maryland, reported on the diversity self-examination he conducted within his own program. While he was relieved to learn that on every level, his staff was diverse, he chose not stop the investigation at that point. He began to meditate on why it was important to have a diverse staff. In his presentation to the LSC Board, Wilhelm noted that his job as executive director is to "spend money on the right things," "get the best deal" and "manage the production of service, the accumulation of resources ... in a way that comes out with the best results for clients." He went on:

"So to accomplish that, I want the best ideas. I want the best talent. I want the most appropriate and creative minds at work. I want the most insightful people. I want the highest degree of motivation from everybody. I believe I can't find it unless I tap a very diverse universe of people, whether it's the funding sources I'm going to [or] the employees I'm trying to recruit; and then to understand the needs, the aspirations, the

experiences of the clients we serve. Together that approach, that tapping into ...diversity, produces what I believe is excellence in performance. When I think of diversity, the word that comes to my mind, always at the forefront, is excellence in performance."

I bring this additional component of diversity to you as a way of illustrating why we seek a diverse universe in which to work and live. Diversity is excellence; without a true and authentically diverse legal services delivery system we will most assuredly fail when we attempt to deliver to clients the most appropriate services required to resolve the desperate legal problems they face.

But any definition of diversity also must include the notion of risk. Diversity involves taking chances and being willing to experience a set back, but always moving beyond the bumps in the road as you seek to challenge tradition and expand boundaries. Today, as you think about the variety of clients and issues you deal with in Oklahoma, as you consider the ideal legal services delivery system you hope to achieve, as you try to build a vibrant state justice community, you must take risks. You must test new ideas and explore alternative approaches. My stint at CRLS taught me that we are all pioneers in this universe of legal services. There are no easy answers or even tried and true traditions we can lean on. My advice today is: Plunge in; try new ways of helping the people who need you the most; listen to new leaders; empower your staff; value new ideas; make sure that the foundations of your plans, strategies and decisions are stabilized by an array of information from likely and unlikely sources. Sometimes, your risks will not pan out, but I promise that you will learn from the experience. And in moving forward you will build a more vibrant equal justice community and a healthier legal services delivery system. As the Chinese proverb notes: *The gem cannot be polished without friction, nor a person perfected without trials.*

Of course, to balance out the risk-taking aspect of moving forward with diversity is the fact that it must be 'managed.' The LSC training module that is in your materials talks about 'managed diversity.' Effective diversity is planned, examined, nurtured and cherished. It is a theme and goal that must permeate all of your efforts. It will require a commitment of time, energy and resources. One of our founding mothers Abigail Adams talked about learning in the same way that I think we should approach managing diversity. She said: "*Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence.*" Her words, written in 1780, can guide us today as we move toward our vision of a world in which justice is available to all who need it on an equal basis. Diversity is not attained by chance; it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence. Today you are moving forward to breathe life into your promise to promote and develop workforces that are representative of a diverse population and to foster environments where everyone is valued for their uniqueness

and personal contributions. Your efforts today are a wonderful step in an important journey, and I have every confidence that you will keep up the great work in this area.

Let me leave you today with one final thought. As you move forward to make inclusion and the celebration of diversity an important part of your civil equal justice community, I urge you to focus not on what separates us but what unites us. Declare war not on each other but on poverty and injustice. Build a delivery system that addresses legal needs without regard for race, gender, ethnicity, age, abilities, or sexual orientation. One that ignores county lines, state boundaries, and imaginary barriers. One that is healthy, vibrant, strong, and inclusive. One that proves that when we all came together today out of a commitment to serve *justice* we did not mean *just us*.

Thank you again for inviting me here today. You make me proud to be a legal services lawyer.